

# Improving Food Sovereignty in Africa – An Activity Theory Approach

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## Abstract

*This article presents a new approach to the problem of food sovereignty in Africa using an Activity Theory approach. Undernourishment in Africa is big reaching 232.5 million citizens in 2015. Sufficient food sovereignty can't be reached because of the weak food-producing abilities in Africa. Smallholder sector can't compete with highly subsidized Northern African farmers. Present intensive agriculture is causing environmental pollution and occupational hazards for the workers. Small holder family farmers could double their harvest in a decade if converting to more agro-ecological production like in organic agriculture. The change of legislation is necessary to increase the private land owning of smallholders that would enhance also the livelihood of organic production, because organic products are mainly from the small farms. More sustainable trade policy should be introduced to diminish the excessive export of food. Education of the African citizens is necessary to increase the understanding of more sustainable choices in production methods and consumption habits by choosing organic that has proven less negative externalities than conventional food and its production. Reducing food waste links to availability of food and food sovereignty. Boosting the fairness and sustainability in the food chains including holistic organic system which is actively contributing to all the 17 the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs).*

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## Introduction

Globally about 795 million people were undernourished in 2015 and 232.5 million (20%) live in Africa, where food is insufficient and the soils are generally poor. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) remains the most food insecure region of the continent with about 75 percent of the land degraded. This study presents a new approach, with Activity theoretical model, for understanding some of the major phenomena that decrease the food sovereignty in Africa. African continent has 1.7 million hectares of organic agricultural land and 30 percent of the world's organic producers (Willer and Lernoud 2017) providing a huge potential to provide organic food with its positive impact to the nature (Reganold & Wachter 2016). Consequently, the Addis Ababa Conference on "Changing Food Systems in Africa: Agroecology and Food Sovereignty and their role in Nutrition and Health" in 2016, called for a complete transformation of food systems across the continent of Africa. Transforming to organic food system is supported by FAO, UN and European Community. Organic Food System Programme (OFSP) is poised to combine sustainable food production (organic agriculture) and sustainable food consumption (sustainable and healthy consumption pattern). The research question now is: How can the level of livelihood in rural areas of Africa be improved to achieve food sovereignty?

Food sovereignty can be described as the right of peoples and sovereign states to democratically determine their own agricultural and food policies, and it comprises of 1) priority to local food production by local people, 2) access of smallholders and landless people to land, water, seeds and

livestock, 3) right of consumers to decide what to consume, 4) fair price for the whole value chain, and 5) populations' participation in agricultural decision-making. Current food production and distribution systems fail to feed the world. Rural–urban migration is basically based on inequality in wealth. In sub-Saharan Africa, about 32.8 and 65 percent of the population dwell in the urban and slums, respectively. On average, about 60 percent of Africans live in places where water supply and sanitation are inadequate. Smallholder farm families in the rural areas continue to play a very pivotal role in African food system despite the difficult conditions under which they operate. Important is therefore to increase the livelihood in rural areas to reduce the rate of urbanization.

The United Nations has set several goals and actions to correct the situation. The organic food system is actively contributing to all the 17 UN sustainable development goals (SDGs) with special emphasis on: Number 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture, and number 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production pattern. (UN 2015b) The food system can be defined as conceptualized relationships between the different forces operating on the commodity flows from primary production to consumers. It can be described as local and global food systems and the local one as an alternative system for industrialized and globalized one. The local food system has a strong connection with the vitality of the rural development.

### **Activity theory for analysing the current activity of the African food system**

Activity theory (AT) was used as a model where to place the current activity of the generalized African food system and to present actions leading to an outcome of increased food sovereignty. Activity theory provides a framework model for where to place the elements of the food system activities: *subject, tools, object, rules, community* and *division of labour*; and where the object leads to an *outcome*.

### **Discussing the current activity of African food system**

The current activity is presented using the Activity theory framework (Figure 1.)

**Outcome** “sufficient food sovereignty” cannot be reached, partly because of the weakened food-producing capabilities in Africa. Smallholder sector cannot compete with highly subsidized Northern farmers and African cities have become dependent on imported food. Food aid is to help in catastrophes, but it can have long run disincentive effects on domestic food production. Removing it, has caused modest increase in prices, but also stimulated own food production in ten years period.

**Subjects** are the actors of the food chain: agriculture, industry, retail, catering and consumers. Approximately 33 million small farms with an average size below 2 hectares, produce about 90 percent of all agricultural production in Africa. FAO supports the increase of the share of smallholders and family farmers in rural food systems.

**Object** of the current food chain activity is financial profit and private good. The present African Food System is not well structured and it is rather difficult to trace origins of food products in case of any eventualities.

**Tools** used in intensified farming and use of pesticides are causing land degradation, desertification, pollution and decreased water resources. Organic agriculture brings benefits, like more nutritious diet and health, job creation and reduced occupational hazards caused by pesticides. The special reporter Olivier se Schutter claimed that small holder family farmers could double their harvest in a decade if converting to more agro-ecological production like in organic agriculture.

**Community's** worsened living conditions in rural areas lead to migration to cities causing urban growth,, food insecurity, crime and preponderance of slums. The livelihood of villages lies on smallfarmers that produce food also for other communities. It could be enhanced by promoting traditional and easily adaptable methods and crops, also typical to organic farming. Good example is Fair Trade that with the end-users support can affect positively to African communities.

**Rules** regulate the food system. Legislative processes are lobbied by large scale actors in the food chain for their own private good . On the contrary to the people in the rural areas, who have no access to influence to the legislation, such as the land reform that could enable the living conditions for food-producing peasants and family farms .

**Division of power** in the food chain is often benefiting the retail and large scale food industry and that increases the price margins in the food chain . Many countries such as China have started to obtain land in Africa for agricultural purposes to secure their own food supplies .

### Suggestion of changes to improve the food sovereignty in Africa

To enable the development in the African food chain towards "sufficient food sovereignty", the change begins on securing the livelihood in rural areas to decrease the immigration to urban areas: 1) government banns selling or renting of land and natural resources to foreign countries and companies, 2) better access is created for rural people to influence legislation to enable the traditional nomad culture and private land owning of smallholders, 3) alternative marketing channels are supported to increase the fairness in the food chain, 4) pre-retail food waste is cut down with better methods, transportation and storage, 5) knowledge transfer and collaboration within the food chain and with researchers and

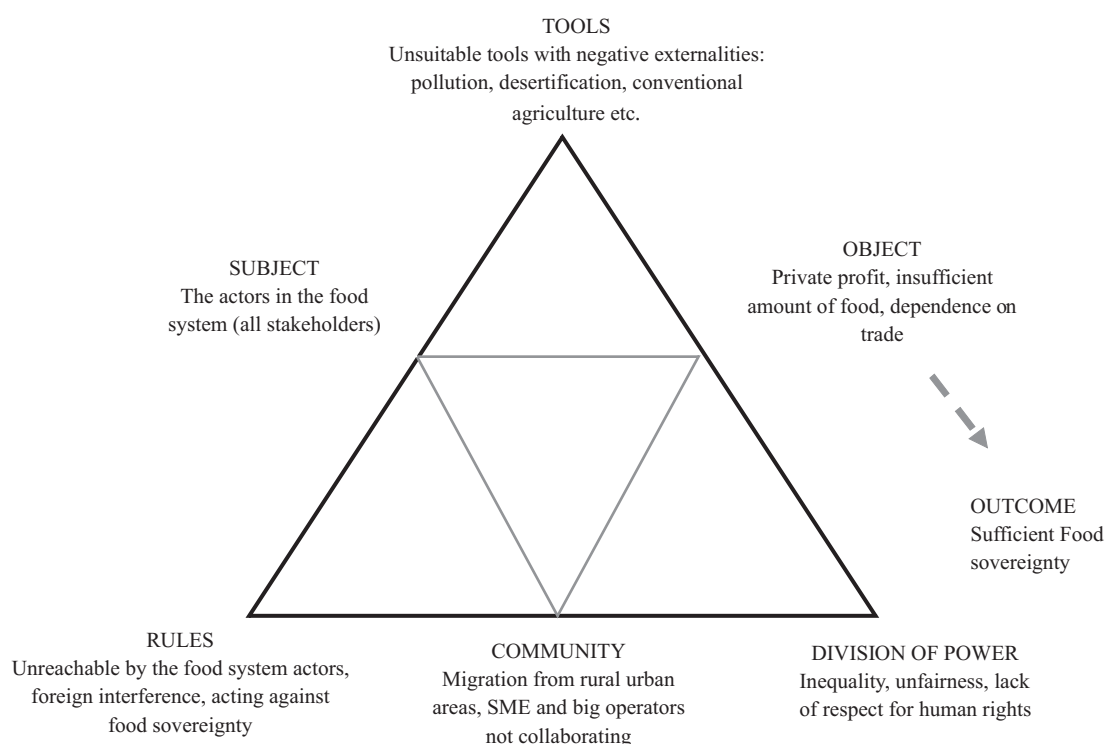


Figure 1. The current activity of African food system in Activity theory framework

authorities is improved, 6) organic principles and sustainable practices for crop production and animal husbandry are introduced, 7) overscale export of food and agriculture input related unrenowned natural resources is restricted and a more sustainable trade policy is introduced.

## Conclusions

A diagnosis of the existing food system in Africa reveals serious irregularities causing financial inequality, malnutrition, hunger and lack of food sovereignty. There is a major need for the governmental interventions hampering selling or renting of land and natural resources to foreign countries and companies; the change of legislation should enable to increase the private land owning of smallholders. The trade could be considered as a major driver to incite farmers to take up innovations for sustainable agriculture development. Education of the African citizens is necessary to decrease the food wastes and to increase the fairness and sustainability in the food chains including holistic organic system which is actively contributing to all the 17 SDGs. This study shows several interactions between Western world and Africa. They have a significant affect on African food sovereignty and therefore it is most important to analyse the activity and interactions of these two connected food systems.

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